

BLENDLED LEARNING

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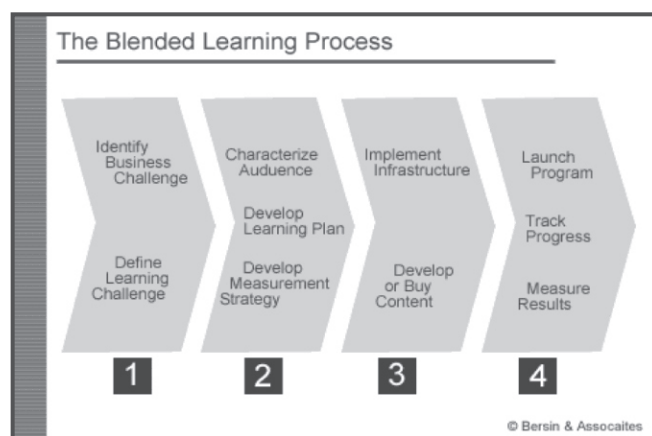
- ♦ A company that used to launch new products in weeks is now able to do it in days.
- ♦ The sales and customer service force are able to get almost 5% more time each year to work with their clients.
- ♦ Management training has become more personalized and efficient yet costs much less.
- ♦ The star performers are able to quickly leverage their expertise across the organization without impacting their personal productivity.

These are just some of the advantages enjoyed by companies implementing “blended learning” strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Way back in 387 B.C. the first university was established in the city of Athens. Plato was the founder of this university, called the 'Academy'. Students did not have to pay to study at the Academy and it survived totally upon donations. The student body was made up of both boys and girls who learned various subjects like Mathematics, Astronomy, Law, and Philosophy. Plato adopted the method of teaching as talking and telling stories to students. Nearly twenty centuries later most of the teaching still happens face-to-face between the students and teachers. According to the State of the Industry Report, American Society for Training & Development about 80% of corporate training is still being conducted in the classroom. However a number of other methods also evolved with time. While the printed book, is over 500 years old, the past 10 years have seen the introduction of several major new technologies for learning and collaboration have been introduced. Educational institutes realized that different methods could work better under different situations among diverse types of students. This mixed approach of using other methods along with the conventional face-to-face way resulted in what is known as 'Blended Learning'. Blended learning basically refers to using several methods for teaching. It can be thought to be a learning program where more than one delivery mode is being used with the ultimate goal of optimizing the learning result and cost of program delivery. Examples of blended learning could be the combination of technology-based resources and traditional print materials or group and individual study or even structured pace study and self-paced study. However with today's prevalence of high

technology blended learning is mostly understood as the use of resources, which combine e-learning with other educational resources. Blended learning is the 'blending' of traditional teaching approaches (face-to-face classroom learning activities) and learning technologies (Internet information and communication technology). A key blended-learning arrangement involves e-mentoring or e-tutoring. These arrangements tend to combine e-learning with some form of human intervention in the learning process, although the involvement of an e-mentor or e-tutor (whose role is performed online) does not necessarily need to be only in the context of e-learning. Given the current state of education in India wherein the student population is huge, the state of universities is not good, learning resources are few, there are serious space constraints and budget are low - this emergence of new information and communication technologies offers hope in the form of alternative teaching strategies like blended learning.



courtesy: www.bersin.com

Different Types of Blends

While blended learning is generally associated with the mix of traditional classroom training and eLearning activities, the term has grown to include a wide gamut of learning strategies. Today a blended learning program could involve merging the following dimensions.

Self-Paced and Collaborative Learning

Self-paced learning refers to individual and on-demand learning at a speed completely decided by the person receiving it. While collaborative learning means a more dynamic communication among numerous learners that brings about knowledge sharing.

The amalgamation of self-paced and collaborative learning could include study of critical literature on a new brand followed by a moderated, online, peer-to-peer discussion of the literature application to the learner's work and clients.

Offline and Online Learning

At the basic level, a blended learning experience merges offline and online forms of learning where the online learning usually means "over the Internet or intranet," and offline learning happens in a more traditional classroom setting. An example of this type of blending may include a learning program that provides study materials and research resources over the Web while providing instructor-led, classroom training sessions as the main medium of instruction.

Structured and Unstructured Learning

Some types of learning may not involve a pre-meditated, structured or formal learning program with organized content in specific sequence like chapters in a textbook. Most learning on the job happens in an unstructured form such as discussions, meetings, conversations during lunch, and e-mail. Many employees say that what they learn in this unstructured manner is more significant and helpful than the specialized education that they may have received for the job. This type of blended program design may look to recording active conversations and documents from unstructured learning events into knowledge banks available on-demand, supporting the work.

Custom Content with Off-the-Shelf Content

Off-the-shelf content is by definition generic unaware of your organization's unique context and requirements. However, generic content is much less expensive to buy and often has higher production values than custom content you build yourself. Generic, self-paced content can be customized today with a blend of live experiences (classroom or online) or through content customization.

Some Examples of Blended Learning

Here are examples where organisations have implemented blended learning for more effectiveness and lower costs.

Penn State University redesigned their Introductory Statistics course by dropping weekly lectures from three to one to allow increased interaction through online workshops. It was observed that all the students in the redesigned class performed much better than before and showed a better understanding of many critical concepts of statistics. Also it is estimated the redesign led to nearly 30% lowering of cost.

The General Chemistry sequence was restructured at The University of Wisconsin-Madison with the main objective of increasing the level of active learning and student feedback. The course redesign involved doing away with one lecture and one discussion period per week. This was substituted with a modularized, online system of diagnostic examples, tutorials, and quizzes. While a study revealed the learning to be nearly the same as of students who were taught the traditional way, the cost-per-student came down by 28%

A major FMCG company in India wanted to set up a new employee orientation program. The customary approach would typically have meant a two to three week classroom-training course introducing new employees to company offerings, philosophy, vision, etc. This classroom-training course would usually take place before a new employee is introduced to the actual work and performance expectations are set. However instead a Blended Collaborative eLearning program (carried out over a longer span of time) was used. This helped in balancing learning and performance with the incorporation of:

- Interactive online opportunities before the employee started work to introduce them to learning resources and their team, and enable them to be better prepared for success.
- A physical classroom launch event for induction and teambuilding.
- A series of self-paced, online tutorials covering the company's product or service.
- An asynchronous, online discussion forum created to allow participants to share customer case studies or experiences.
- A series of live, collaborative coaching sessions where the new employees talked with members of the management team.
- An online, Web-based post-test that certified the expertise of new employees.
- An online survey that allowed participants to provide their feedback about the learning program for future improvements

Apart from the brief introductory kickoff session, the remainder of these modules took place in the employee's work context over an extended period of time minimizing the employee's time-to productivity while nurturing internalization and application of key learning in the job context.

Stanford University has more than 10 years experience with self-paced enhancement programs for talented students. However they faced a problem of only a little more than half of their highly motivated students would actually complete their programs. They diagnosed the matter as a disparity between the student's desired learning style and the program's delivery method. The introduction of live eLearning into their program to cater to these needs raised student completion rates to 94%. The improvement was attributed to the ability of a scheduled live event to motivate learners to complete self-paced materials on time, the availability of interaction with instructors and peers, and better quality mentoring experiences. The Stanford research strongly suggests that linking self-paced material to live eLearning delivery could have a deep effect on overall usage and completion rates enabling organizations to radically increase the return on their existing investments in self-paced content.

Benefits of Blended Learning

Blended Learning treats learning as not just a one-time episode but a continuous process. Some of the advantages of using blending vis-à-vis using a single learning delivery method are:

Blended Learning enables you to think about the business issue.

"Blend mix" decisions are almost like doing "portfolio management." It needs to start with your business goals. Below are given certain steps, that one could follow before implementing blended learning.

- ✓ **Particularly what is the business problem or goal?**
(Need to increase sales revenue for a new brand)
- ✓ **What is the learning problem, which you believe is creating this business problem? Can you be sure it is a "learning" problem or simply an issue of sharing out new information?** *(Need to train sales reps on value proposition and pricing of this new brand)*
- ✓ **What is the profile of the target audience?**
(How much time will they have to use the content? What communication links will they have? What kind of learning style and education level do they need? What do they respond to? How motivated are they?)
- ✓ **What are the characteristics of the content?**
(How OFTEN does it need to be updated? Are we "informing, developing skills, or creating competencies?)
- ✓ **What kind of measurement do we need and how much? What amount of measurement does the business problem justify?** *(Measurement is expensive what do we really need to measure in order to solve this business problem? Completion? Scores? Certifications? Or nothing at all?)*

A big impact can be expected

Blended learning has a huge and measurable business impact. Many companies have experienced a blended learning program as being the only solution to their problems. For example blended learning enables you to launch a new scheme or program among a high number

of global audiences. Cisco's Reseller Certification Program needs to touch about 900,000 people. With an audience so wide a web-based curriculum is the only answer. When Siemens had to introduce a global change in accounting practices, the target audience being about 10,000 financial professionals - a simulation-based solution was the best solution. Blended learning enables training of thousands of employees within a short period of time. While the content development time is constant, it is the deployment where the time saving takes place. Moreover sophisticated training programs involving complex content, multiple media etc can be successfully executed. While the infrastructure cost involved in blended learning is higher, it could work out cheaper than the traditional way on a per employee basis. A telecom major in India developed a major SAP upgrade program, which was business critical across more than 10,000 employees for a total development cost of 50,00,000. This worked out to a mere Rs500 per employee for development cost probably what a reasonable dinner costs in a metro.

More extensive reach

If a learning program has a single delivery mode the critical knowledge gets limited some way or the other. For example, a physical classroom-training program can only be availed by those who can participate at a fixed time and location, while a virtual classroom session can be attended by students anywhere on the globe. Moreover when live sessions are recorded and played back, the reach can also be extended to those who could not attend at a specific time.

Optimization of Cost and Time

Merging different delivery modes tends to balance out and optimize the learning program development and deployment cost and time. A program that is totally self-paced, or Web-based training content may be too costly to produce since it would require multiple resources and skills. However joining virtual collaborative learning forums and coaching sessions with simpler self-paced materials such as generic off-the-shelf Web-based training, case studies, recorded live eLearning events etc could be just as effective if not more.

Endpoint

Organizations are fast discovering that blended learning not only leads to a saving in time and cost, but provides a more natural way to learn and work. They are looking beyond the traditional training models to novel approaches to knowledge transfer and performance support. These are better aligned with business goals and deliver measurable results. By focusing on the specific business objective, rather than the learning technology, there is the opportunity to fundamentally re-think how learning programs are designed and delivered. This re-thinking also allows breaking free from the concept of a "course" and considering methods that provide a continuous learning process with active participation by the entire organization in sharing, teaching and mentoring mission-critical knowledge. Organizations that implement blended training methods are likely to have more productive staffs, be more active in implementing change, and prove more successful in achieving their goals. It was Jack Welch the well-known chairman of General Electric who said that the ability of an organization to learn, and rapidly convert that learning into action, is the ultimate source of competitive advantage. Organizations must look beyond the traditional boundaries of classroom instruction by augmenting their current best practices with new advances in learning and collaboration technologies to maximize results. More importantly, organizations must seek to empower every individual in the organization to become an active participant in the learning and collaboration process. The Epic Group plc carried out a survey on the future role of blended learning within organisations. The survey was conducted among more than 200 training and development professionals in large organisations and across the public sector. The respondents were asked for their opinion on the development of e-learning over the next three years. The research findings showed that classroom training is bound to be challenged as the dominant form of learning delivery. Most respondents felt that e-learning will be most effectively supported in blends by tutoring and mentoring activities, both on - or offline, rather than by traditional classroom methods. More than lower costs, organizations

will expect benefits like greater access to learning and greater flexibility from blended learning. Good content was considered as more important than improved technology. The key aspect of successful blended learning approaches is to evaluate what aspects of a course of studies are better-suited using Internet technologies, vis-à-vis conventional classroom methods. This demands a clear understanding and commitment to the intended learning results and then designing and utilizing appropriate technologies whether they are face-to-face or online.

Notes & References

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